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ABSTRACT

Claims that grammar instruction does not improve written composition have led some teachers to a confident consensus that they do not have to deal with grammar, yet many still firmly believe in teaching it. Grammar instruction (meaning pedagogical or school grammar rather than scientific or linguistic grammar) can be viewed from the metaphorical point of view of two religious ideologies, fundamentalism and secular humanism. With respect to language, fundamentalists might say that outside of humanity there exists a body of stable and fixed rules which are the "true" forms of language. Textbooks are the authority, in parallel with the unquestioned authority of the Bible or Koran. On the other hand, secular humanists, who emphasize the uniqueness of each individual and relativism, would maintain that people do not need to learn external rules (like grammar) consciously and explicitly, that social settings and practice naturally constrain personal efforts at oral and written communication and thinking. The "whole language" approach to English language arts fits in with the secular humanist ideology. Perhaps grammar can be successfully taught from either perspective, and there is probably a continuum of positions rather than a dichotomy in practice, but it is helpful to use these analogies to clarify positions on the grammar teaching debate. (Five pages of references are included.) (SKC)

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Grammar as a Hostage to Ideology

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Paper presented at the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the
Canadian Society for the Study of Education

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Good Speech

Think not because thine inmost heart means well,
Thou hast the freedom of rude speech; sweet words
Are like the voices of returning birds
Filling the soul with summer, or a bell
That calls the weary and the sick to prayer.
Even as thy thought, so let thy speech be fair.

Archibald Lampman

Introduction

Twenty-four years ago Braddock et al. (1963) made what has been widely regarded as the definitive statement about the value of teaching English grammar. They wrote:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teacher, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing (37-38).

Kolln (1981) noted that the 56-word quotation above "has appeared over and over again...in books and articles and convention papers and classrooms and casual conversations" (140). As one of the most apparently dependable propositions about the teaching of English

language arts, the 1963 conclusion about the absence of transfer between traditional grammar teaching and composition was extended to the transformational-generative version of grammar by a widely-cited New Zealand study (Elley, et al., 1976). On the basis of findings from a three-year investigation, the conclusion drawn was "that the effects of (transformational-generative) grammar study are negligible" (Elley, et al. 1976, 17). The official acceptance of these anti-grammar conclusions is clear in recently published provincial curriculum guides for English language arts in Canada, where grammar study is firmly and unequivocally relegated to a very minor role in the teaching of oral and written composition (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 1983; Alberta Education, forthcoming). The conclusions have been vigorously embraced by one branch of the Canadian English teaching establishment, the Canadian Council of Teachers of English. On May 15, 1987 at the Annual General Meeting of the Council in Winnipeg the following motion, brought forward by the Council's Resolutions Committee, was passed:

Whereas there is no evidence that teaching any grammar at all of any theoretical persuasion has any beneficial effects on students' use of language; and whereas there is considerable evidence from research that the level of abstraction in grammatical study is so high that it remains incomprehensible to most students; and whereas the time wasted on formal study of grammar could be better used to develop fluency in the use of writing and speaking English or studying literature; move that the teaching of grammar be replaced by activities that are known to foster literacy.

Thus a confident consensus against grammar teaching prevails in the authorized discourse on English language arts education found in the deliberations of provincial curriculum committees, in most of the pages of contemporary language arts journals, and in the substance and business of English language arts conferences. However, the consensus tends to ignore three sources of criticism: classroom practice, popular opinion, and academic dissent. Many teachers affirm the value of grammar teaching based on their perceptions of their own experience as students and as teachers, and they continue to teach parts of speech and sentence analysis in spite of official disapproval. In this defiance, these teachers might find support in the popular conception of linguistic deterioration and a retreat from language standards in contemporary usage, frequently attributed to a failure of schools to teach thoroughly the basics, including English grammar (Daniels, 1983, 26). Peter Gzowski, the host of CBC Radio's program, *Morningside*, revealed this thinking when he responded, in a 1986 interview, to a university student's claim that she had not studied grammar in school with, "If you didn't study grammar in your English courses, what did you study?"

While it is possible for consensus spokespersons to set aside the opinions of practitioners as unscientific and the reports of "Establishment journalists" (Williams, 1979, 179) in the media as sensational, the academic challenge to the anti-grammar consensus seems to have been ignored rather than countered. For example, the validity of research conclusions such as those of Braddock et al., (1963) and of Elley, et al., (1976) have been questioned (Kolln, 1981; Neuleib, 1977; Newkirk, 1978). Neuleib (1977) noted that the popular quotation from

Braddock et al. (1963) was preceded by a cautionary statement that is usually overlooked: "Uncommon, however, is carefully conducted research which studies the effect of formal grammar on actual composition over an extended period of time" (in Neuleib, 1977, 248). These criticisms of the quality of the research on which strong conclusions have been based appear not to have been acknowledged nor rebutted by curriculum developers.

In fact it is superficially curious how different writers can arrive at different evaluations of the same research. Petrosky (1977), for example, referred to some of the studies reviewed by Braddock et al. (1963) as "representative of the best kind of thoroughly designed educational research" (86), and in respect to the Elley et al. (1976) study he judged "its validity to be unquestionable" (88). Newkirk (1978), however, criticized the conclusions of the Elley et al. (1976) study, saying the authors went beyond their data in claiming that grammar teaching was ineffective. Newkirk (1978) took the findings that no significant differences emerged in language performance among different treatments and turned the authors' conclusion around to say: "The grammar groups read and wrote as proficiently as the group which free read and wrote extensively" (48). Bassett (1980), making reference to Newkirk (1978), and escalating the language considerably, stated that the Elley et al. conclusion "grossly exaggerates the study's findings because all three groups performed equally well on the objective reading and writing exercises" (58). After considering these divergent judgments, Hartwell (1985) concluded that "it may well be that the grammar question is not open to resolution by experimental research" (107).

Perhaps the consensus is more fragile than the CCTE motion asserts. As a traditional positivistic faith in the capacity of research to reveal the stable and generalizable rules and laws of human learning and behaviour is confronted by an anthropologically based cultural pluralism and its denial of an abiding objective truth, the question of the relationship between propositional knowledge about language and linguistic performances takes on infinitely more complex and local forms. How you see that relationship depends on where you are looking from and what you are looking with. Or, as James put it, truth is "what it is better for us to believe" than "the accurate representation of reality" (in Rorty, 1979, 10). The relativist challenge to a positivist view of reality may be a useful context within which to examine the grammar issue, and this paper will attempt to explore that possibility using the concept of ideology and two religious examples of the concept as metaphors for stances and convictions about grammar teaching.

Ideology

People do not take kindly to the term "ideological" when you apply it to them or their ideas (Geertz, 1964, 48). The political imputation suggests guilt by association with the set of major "isms" of modern politics: liberalism, communism, nationalism, capitalism and fascism. The label is treated as an accusation of chauvinism--emotional, irrational loyalty--rather than thoughtful and intelligent judgement. "Sensible people rely on experience, or have a philosophy; silly people rely on ideology" (Williams, 1976, 130). The term conjures images of pigeonholes for the forcible classification of complex ideas and

people. Political ideologues are often regarded as utopian in their unrealistic optimism for their goals, subject to oversimplification in their division of the world into friends and foes, and overconfident in their faith in human progress (Watkins, 1964, 7-8).

However, these negative connotations are associated with a narrow political meaning of ideology. The term is also used in a broader sociological and cultural sense to refer to those underlying, invisible belief systems that unavoidably influence any of our convictions. Geertz (1964), for example, defined ideology as a "generic term applied to general ideas potent in specific situations of conduct" (17). "Thought", Geertz (1964) went on, "is shaped by the overall values of the society within which it is contained" (49). In this sense, ideology is quite like Hall's (1976) concept of the "unconscious culture" (2) which lies "beneath the clearly perceived, highly explicit surface culture" (15). In this sense, no one can really escape from ideology; it is there whether we like it or not. Hence its inevitability renders it a more neutral concept.

Bernier (1981) offered a comprehensive definition of ideology in this broad sense. Ideology is:

"an integrated pattern of ideas, system of beliefs, or a 'group consciousness' which characterizes a social group. Such a pattern or system may include doctrines, ideals, slogans, symbols and directions for social and political action. Ideologies also include objectives, demands, judgements, norms and justifications, and in this sense they are

value-impregnated systems of thought which may be perceived as sacred" (293).

In other words, an ideology is a personal world view that influences thinking on particular large-scale or small-scale matters.

A Definition of Grammar

In order to test the usefulness of the concept of ideology as a way of understanding the grammar issue, it is first necessary to define grammar insofar as its school manifestations are concerned. Nelson Francis (1954) presented three meanings of "grammar". Grammar 1 referred to the implicit, unconscious knowledge of language structures that permits people to understand and produce linguistic utterances. Grammar 2 was that body of propositional information about language categories, forms, and rules that is derived from the formal study of language as an academic subject. Grammar 3 referred to "linguistic etiquette", or usage. Hartwell (1985) suggested that Francis' Grammar 2 should be subdivided into "scientific grammar", the subject matter of linguistics, and "school grammar", literally the grammar that is taught in schools (110). The implication of this taxonomy, of course, is that grammar as taught in schools is not scientific. It is this grammar, also referred to by Thomas (1974) as "traditional school grammar", that is the target of this paper.

Meckel (1963), in a thorough and balanced review of research into the relationship between grammar teaching and writing performance (a review which, according to Kolln (1981), was eclipsed by the strong language

of the Braddock et al. (1963) report), provided a systematic view of the content of school grammar derived from the many studies of the transfer value of its teaching. It included knowledge of the parts of speech, both memorization and recall of definitions, their conceptual understanding, and ability to identify parts of speech in sentences; the ability to define and recognize structural elements of sentences such as subjects and predicates; the ability to diagram sentences; and the ability to recognize sentence faults. According to Meckel (1963), the above list constituted what is often referred to as "formal grammar" instruction. This latter term often implies a deductive approach to instruction, whereby grammar is taught as a unit or class separate from other parts of the English language arts program on the assumption that the mastery of grammar as the theory of language is a prerequisite to the practice of language in writing.

There is also the alternative to formal grammar, called since about 1900 "functional grammar", in which grammatical concepts were taught according to evidence of need provided by analysis of errors in writing committed either by the students themselves or identified by surveys of various samples of writing. In the case of functional grammar, the propositional corpus in the curriculum was considerably reduced, and its teaching was often integrated with the practice of composition. Another source of variation in school grammar was introduced by the "new grammars", from descriptive and transformational-generative linguistics, each of which has been the inspiration for school versions since the 1960s.

In summary, the essential feature of this view of school grammar is its

emphasis on the propositional content of language knowledge as a body of information about language. Students learn this information which may be traditional and prescriptive, descriptive, or transformational and which may be presented deductively and separately from composition or integrated with it functionally and according to need. Obviously this range of substance and method presents a challenge to any experimental investigator who sets out to operationalize a grammar treatment in classrooms. Any critical reading of such research needs to consider the details of what was taught and how it was taught in an evaluation of its conclusions.

Two Religious Ideologies as Metaphors for the Debate about Grammar Teaching

Having established definitions of ideology and grammar, I now want to examine the possibility that when teachers and others debate the role and value of grammar in school programs they are really concerned about something else. It may be that grammar is a shibboleth, a symbol, a touchstone, and a symptom of other, more basic and fundamental convictions about education, language, and society. In other words, the debate is often ideological in the sense that underlying the arguments about the merits of learning the categories and rules of English grammar is an opposition of world views that is rarely made explicit and that unconsciously informs the invisible discourse, or the "epistemes" (Foucault, 1970), of the issue.

I want to explore, in the sense of perhaps a metaphor for the two opposing sides in the grammar controversy, two ideological positions in

the study and practice of religion, without prejudice to either grammar or religion. The two religious ideologies are fundamentalism and secular humanism. Both have explicit agendas for public education related to textbook selection, sex education, and particular views about science in the curriculum. Beyond those agendas, my claim is that their ideological assumptions parallel those that underlie the debate about grammar teaching.

A fundamentalist stance on religion asserts that truth, or reality, lies outside or beyond human experience, as some other-worldly, unwavering, absolute set of precepts. These precepts are abiding, unchanging, and dependable for all time. They are available to people in certain written works in which God's will is revealed through words that were divinely inspired. Fundamental Christians, for example, believe in the "inerrancy" of Scripture, which, being "God-breathed", has the "quality of being free from error in all of its statements and affirmations" (Falwell, 1981, 8). Taylor (1987) described the ideology of fundamentalism:

Rather than being an autonomous agent, man, they (fundamentalists) assert, is under the control of an infinite God. these fundamentalists insist that certain knowledge of God is revealed in a sacred book. The sacred text can be the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, or even the spoken word of an all-powerful master. By relocating the center that seemed to have been lost, such texts are supposed to make it possible once again to know and judge with confidence" (3).

There is a sharp contrast between fundamentalism and secular humanism. According to the latter, meaning or reality is located within human beings who create the world that they live in without the aid of a divine being. Secular humanism elevates transient human values over abiding spiritual ones and advocates the view that humans can handle their own affairs without divine intervention. In the person is located the source of goodness and creativity (Ramm, 1974, 235). As Brubacher (1986) wrote: "Whereas formerly humans were seen in relation to the world which defined them, now the world is seen in relation to humans, deriving its meaning from them" (293). Reality is not a cosmic order which people have to accept as given, but "all the material and spiritual goods to which man can aspire derive from the order to which he belongs, that is, the hierarchies which are the interpreters and custodians of the cosmic order (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol.3 & 4, 1967, 69)

A Fundamentalist Approach to Language

Now we can examine the grammar controversy through the metaphor of these ideologies. A position on language that corresponds to fundamentalism would say that outside man there exists a body of rules and definitions that are stable and fixed. These rules establish the true forms of language (Standard English, for example). They define the language world that individuals seek to enter, and they can be enshrined in authoritative textbooks. In a broader parallel with English as a school subject, a fundamentalist position would be like that of Matthew Arnold, who, over 100 years ago, urged that schools

should teach the literary and the linguistic heritage as "the best that has been thought and said" (in Hoggart, 1979, 65). In terms of semantics, there is a similar echo of fundamentalism in two theoretical positions on language which Williams (1979) identified as having views of linguistic meanings as fixed and stable entities: structuralism with its notion of language as "the creation of arbitrary signs which are then reproduced within groups" (176); and "Leavis's notion of language as a continuous legacy through the ages that carries the finest insights of the community...a single heritage of meanings which were held to sanction particular contemporary values" (176-7).

Fries (1927), the structural linguist, pointed out the parallel between religious and linguistic authority in similar terms when he discussed the character of school grammar texts:

Although the present-day popular views of grammar do not, in medieval fashion, find "divine inspiration in the eight parts of speech" and veiled references to the Trinity in "the three persons of verbal conjugation", yet they do look upon the rules of the common school grammars as the infallible measure of correct language, and the one defence against the forces of corruption that continually beset it. (221)

Fries (1927) traced the development of this belief in the infallibility of the grammar rule from the Greek "Analogists" who insisted that there was a strict law of analogy between the word and the idea it represents and that the laws of grammar, established by reason, could admit of no exceptions. Opposed to this position was that of the "Anomalists" who

maintained there could be no rules of grammar except those that were authorized by custom and usage. It was the Analogist position which grammarians adopted in the second half of the 18th century as they set out to "reduce English to rule and to correct the usage of English people by making it conform to a standard of reason" (228).

Discussing basic approaches to the teaching of rhetoric, Lloyd-Jones (1972) described a classical position in terms similar to what I am calling a fundamentalist stance. It represented an allegiance to a discoverable, eternal truth which language is adequate to express, and to a constant and predictable human nature. A writing course emerging from such a stance would emphasize rules, order, the conventions of polite usage, and a standard language form based on the dialect of responsible people.

A Secular Humanist Approach to Language

Corresponding to secular humanism, on the other hand, is a position on language which maintains that the linguistic individual does not need to learn external rules consciously and explicitly. Through personal efforts at oral and written communication and thinking, the individual's unique linguistic skills develop, constrained naturally by the social settings of their practice. Hoggart (1979) identified the central assertion of this position as the claim that "the artist is not a special kind of man; every man is a special kind of artist" (56). The doctrine of usage, maintaining that any rules of language are transiently based in the community's contemporary speech standards, is clearly embedded in this humanist philosophy. Williams (1979),

discussing the shifting nature of language meanings, wrote that "language is a continuous social production in its most dynamic sense" (176), and that it is a system of signs "which take on the changeable and often reversed social relations of a given society" (176).

In Lloyd-Jones' (1972) analysis, the classical position on teaching rhetoric contrasted sharply with what he called a "romantic" stance, which is very similar to what I am calling a secular humanist position. Instead of generalization and rule, the romantic emphasis is on uniqueness and infinity, and it holds to the belief that words represent only part of reality, with interesting truths slipping between words. It finds truth not in externals but in the human mind. A romantic writing course would stress the uniqueness of real communication, writing as part of the development of the whole person, writing as a process of self-discovery, and learning to write through the "experience" of writing. The focus in this approach is on difference not on conformity to standards and forms.

The "whole language" approach to English language arts clearly fits into this secular humanist or romantic ideology. It zealously emphasizes experience as a starting point for curriculum; it promotes talk and writing as modes of learning; it authorizes personal response to literature as opposed to externally sanctioned criticism; and it locates the meaning of written text in the individual reader's own experience of it. Truth, knowledge, and language are constructed by individuals; they do not lie outside individuals waiting to be taught and learned as categories and precepts.

Mathieson (1975) discussed the significance for language arts teachers of the shift from a fundamentalist or classical paradigm to the secular humanist or romantic position. She caught the difference between the two attitudes when she wrote:

The development of a fervently optimistic, reverential attitude towards children's expression ... has had far-reaching effects on the role of the teacher. His image, no longer drawn from the public world of ambassadors and missionaries (of culture), has come to be created from the private areas of experience (106).

Although Mathieson did not use the terms "fundamentalist" and "secular humanist", these labels are compatible with the shifts she described.

Conclusions

I am not saying that people who believe in teaching grammar are fundamentalists in religion, although they might be; nor am I saying that whole language disciples are secular humanists, although they might be; nor am I putting one group down and elevating the other. I am simply noticing an interesting parallel and wondering if there might be an urge towards linguistic certainty in proponents of grammar teaching that takes comfort in a body of fixed rules that lie outside the individual. And I am also intrigued by the parallel between a faith in the human being in the secular humanist sense and the faith in the child that whole language advocates espouse. I wonder if there is something deep in our unconscious cultures or in our individual

temperaments that predisposes us towards one particular stance on the grammar issue. if so, then our convictions about the teaching of grammar may not really be derived from a rational analysis of the evidence, nor from an objective assessment of our experience. That is the sense in which I call grammar a hostage to ideology.

I have presented this parallel between religion and grammar teaching in the form of a dichotomy, as though there were two fixed opposing positions. It is likely more useful to think of a continuum with fundamentalism on one end and secular humanism on the other. Individual convictions and actual teaching programs in action in English language arts classrooms probably distribute themselves somewhere along the continuum, some being oriented more to a fundamentalist position, others to a humanist one, and in either case, perhaps, not always consistently.

Does this metaphorical continuum have any value? For one thing it might clarify the nature of the debate. Nunberg (1983), for example wrote: "What we need now is not more invective...but a return to civil discussion of the problems of grammar and their social importance" (45). The invective he referred to was that associated with the shrillness and dogmatism of conservative ideologists "who seek to impose their own linguistic norms on people who have perfectly serviceable norms of their own" (32), and with the overstated criticisms of traditional grammar from linguists. The location in ideologies or world views of the real issue that separates educators on the grammar question is perhaps a step towards Nunberg's civil discussion. It gives insight into opposing viewpoints and perhaps

induces humility in one's own. On the other hand, it is possible that for some the notion of ideologies, especially religiously based ideologies, is so invested with emotional provocation that the metaphor is obstructive rather than helpful.

Secondly, an ideological perspective contributes to an understanding of the disagreements about the conclusions that may be drawn from the results of research into the relationship between grammar instruction and writing ability referred to in the introduction. It is relevant to note that fundamentalism and secular humanism mirror different research traditions in the social sciences as a whole . A faith in an external, stable world outside the individual permitted a positivistic research paradigm drawn from the natural sciences. Social and human variables could be isolated and measured and generalizable conclusions drawn that could apply to all comparable social settings and human beings. The term "behaviours" implied that human actions were under the control of stimuli rather than of an autonomous human being. A secular and humanist tradition authorizes a different kind of research: the focus is on the unique individual not on the representative sample; variables cannot be studied separately from their complex contexts. As Popkewitz (1984) wrote, the rationality of science is socially constructed. In other words, there are values and assumptions implicit in the way a research project is conceived, in the questions it asks, in the data that are collected, and in the analyses that are carried out. The debate about the results of research into the efficacy of grammar teaching is, therefore, inevitably confounded with these values and assumptions.

Thirdly, it is useful to remember too that ideologies in the narrow sense are characterized by oversimplification and excessive optimism (Watkins, 1964, 7-8). Lloyd-Jones (1972) warned about these consequences of the classical and romantic ideologies each of which tended to reduce the other to a caricature. Romantics try to portray the classicist curriculum as mechanical, dogmatic, stultifying and teacher-proofed; the classicists paint the romantic curriculum as merely a self-indulgent, "anything goes" experience, lacking any criticism and rigour. Gage (1986) complained of the same, more general tendency in educational debate for oppositions to be defined as mythical caricatures.

If we can see through the ideologies, it may even be possible to discern a better grammar teaching than the usual stereotype of the fundamentalist position permits. Priestley (1975), for example, described how he taught grammar to grade 10 students in rural Alberta in the 1930s:

I can still remember how I started my first class with them. I wrote on the blackboard the word "iron", and said, "What part of speech is that?" When a number of them promptly called out "Noun", I wrote after "iron" "my shirt". When they called out "Verb", I rubbed out "my shirt", and wrote "is hard", then, still leaving the original word in place, made other sentences around it, including "His head is iron hard", which gave them some trouble (25).

Priestley (1975) went on to say that "the two important things about that class were that they learned through grammar the relation between structure and meaning, and became closely observant readers and flexible and precise writers" (26). The problem was, according to Priestley, that grammar had a bad name from the poor textbooks that were available and the poorly trained teachers who had to rely on their narrow definitions of correctness thereby missing the real point of grammar teaching which is to show how language functions. Greenbaum (1982) wrote that based on his own experience as a teacher and writer, he had no doubt that a study of grammatical structures, word order, and cohesion devices can improve written style. As one of the authors of the prestigious A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Quirk et al., 1985), Greenbaum no doubt brought an extensive knowledge of grammar to his teaching.

Perhaps there is no reason why good grammar teaching is not possible under either a fundamental perspective on language or under a secular humanist view. In the former case, in the hands of enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers, the categories and functions of linguistic structures may come alive as tools for precision in writing and speech. In the latter, the same tools may be brought to bear by students as they are led by sensitive teachers to reflect on their own writing. Such teachers would know their grammar but would choose to teach its categories and functions as needs arise in the process of composition. In any case the truth, in any objective, valid, reliable sense of evidence in favour of any particular position on grammar teaching, is simply unavailable. Any perspective is unavoidably ideological. Some might find that relativist conclusion distressingly wishy washy; others

might find it liberating.

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